

Perfect 10

Barbara and Ken Beem

Rating Corkscrews

Intriguing, ingenious, sometimes downright humorous: Corkscrews are a passion for legions of collectors. And in an age of screwtops and plastic "corks," these purists continue to appreciate the simple tools that are sometimes really not all that simple.

To keep wine from souring in the bottle, corks were introduced as a way to limit its exposure to air. And with that advancement came the dilemma of how to extract the cork in one piece. The first corkscrew, a "bottlescrew," is thought to have been introduced in England in the seventeenth century, and this basic tool has evolved over time. Corkscrews are made all over the world and are found in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. The numbers speak for themselves. Collectors recognize 13 different categories of corkscrews, and more than 9,000 examples have been identified and described on "ScrewBase," a digital catalog. Before 1900, some 400 patents were issued in the United States for these mechanisms; this number has subsequently risen to 1,000 and continues to grow.

Fervor for corkscrews keeps pace with their production. Christie's conducts a corkscrew auction twice a year. Additionally, enthusiasts at www.CollectorCorkscrews.com hold periodic online sales. The Canadian Corkscrew Collectors Club (CCCC) boasts a membership of more than 200 collectors worldwide. The International Correspondence of Corkscrew Addicts (ICCA) is an organization of 50 members, by invitation only.

Opening a bottle of fine wine can be a theatrical production, and the corkscrew used to accomplish this certainly adds to the drama, Paul Luchsinger, a Virginia wine enthusiast and member of ICCA, agrees. Collectors "very rarely" use their most cherished corkscrews for fear of damaging them: Condition is important and the value of a corkscrew that can no longer fulfill its purpose "plummets." On the other hand, in the case of extremely rare corkscrews, minor flaws are sometimes overlooked.

"It's the thrill of the chase," said Luchsinger, a longtime corkscrew enthusiast, or "helixophile." "You never know what you'll find next." Advanced collectors want the best of the best and are willing to pay steep prices (in the five figures) for what they covet, but a fine example can be procured with a \$100 budget.

For diligent hunters, "it is still possible to find bargains," said Luchsinger, adding that thrift shops occasionally yield \$1 discoveries of interest.

Cheers!

Photographs courtesy of Fred Kincaid. For more information, visit www.CollectorCorkscrews.com.



Rated "10," best, is this Shrapnel corkscrew, patented in 1839, manufactured in Birmingham, England, and named for its inventor, Henry S. Shrapnel (son of the man who invented the time-fragmenting shell used widely until World War I). The barrel-shaped mechanical corkscrew has a locking handle and is made of bronze. A silver gilt version of this model was presented to Prince Albert by Shrapnel in 1840; it remains in Queen Elizabeth II's possession.

To operate this double-action corkscrew, the worm is set in the top position, and the barrel is placed over the bottle to center the worm. The threaded handle is then locked into place and turned clockwise, thereby inserting the worm into the cork. When the lock is released, further clockwise turning causes the right-threaded shaft to lift and pull the cork. With fewer than 15 corkscrews of this kind still in existence, this example is valued at \$25,000.



Rated "8," better, this Philos Blake fixed wing nut mechanical corkscrew is distinctive for many reasons, not the least being the fact that the 1860 patent for its design represents the first corkscrew patent granted by the United States. Blake, sometimes called "the granddaddy of all American mechanical patents," was the nephew of Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin. With this double-action corkscrew, the worm is inserted into the cork when the top handle is turned clockwise. Turning the lower handle clockwise results in the right-threaded shaft lifting and pulling the cork. It is estimated that there are approximately two dozen

Philos Blake wing nut corkscrews in existence; because of their place in history, they are considered a key component in any American corkscrew collection. This one would probably sell for about \$10,000.

Rated "7.5," good, this "Hootch Owl" corkscrew was designed by Richard G. Smythe (and patented in 1938) as a combination corkscrew and crown cap lifter. If that were not enough, it also functions as a nutcracker. A traditional double-lever corkscrew, this style is not as rare as the aforementioned corkscrews, but collectors appreciate it for its graphic appeal. Note that the owl's eyes appear to be open on one side but are shut on the other. After the worm is screwed into the cork, the arms of the tool (or, in this case, the wings of the owl) are pressed down to lift the cork. Amusing examples like this one can be purchased for \$2,500 to \$3,500.

